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Harold's back!
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One Family's Chemical Nightmare

They've lost their jobs, their health and their home



The Kubicas: Jerry, Elaine, Lisa, Jeri, Richard, Becky and her daughter Fawn

By Michael Moore
and Ed Weisbart

Christmas Eve, 1978.

The Kubica family of Chesaning spent the day moving into the new \$80,000 home they had built on an isolated road north of town.

That night, their nightmare began, a nightmare that, within six months, would drive them from their house, cost them their jobs and make them permanently ill, unable to function as normal, healthy people.

It would also lead to attempted suicide.

This is not the story of ghosts or spirits or Amityville horror. It is a modern tragedy, set in 20th century industrial America, where untold millions are beginning to suffer the results of our chemically dependent society.

It is a story that, for now, has no happy ending.

Jerry and Elaine Kubica had lived in Chesaning all of their lives. Jerry, 48, owned his own construction firm and Elaine, 44, was one of the area's top real estate agents with over a million dollars in sales during her first year with Paxton Realty. Their combined income—nearly \$60,000 a year—provided a very comfortable living for them and their six children—Becky, 24; Cindy, 23; Greg, 22; Jeri, 20; Lisa, 12; and Richard, 9. They were a healthy family;

none had ever been in the hospital, except for Elaine to have her children. In fact, they can't remember ever going to the doctor for any illness.

In April, 1978 the house they had been living in on Baldwin Road, just outside of Chesaning, burned to the ground. Covered by insurance, they began looking for a site to build a new home. They came across a densely wooded lot on a dirt road far out into the countryside. Rolling hills and virgin trees, hundreds of years old, the vacant acres on Gary Road seemed like the ideal spot to build their "dream house."

That summer Jerry and his friends began building the house. Then on October 16 something happened. Bill Hock, who was working with Jerry on the house, became sick while installing the insulation. He started to throw up and felt like he was going to faint. He asked Jerry if he could go home.

The next day Jerry noticed he wasn't feeling too good. Others felt the same way. More ventilation, frequent trips outside for fresh air, working at a slower pace.

Finally, the house was finished in

December and on the 24th the Kubicas moved in. Almost immediately the symptoms set in.

Burning skin. Itching eyes. Diarrhea. Dizziness. Constant flu. Everyone seemed sick all the time.

Jerry developed pleurisy and Elaine contracted bronchitis. One night Jerry woke up and he couldn't breathe.

"It felt like someone had put my chest in a vise," Jerry recalled. "I thought I was going to die."

The symptoms became more severe. Extreme drowsiness and a desire to sleep all the time made them miss a lot of work and school. The children would start vomiting for no apparent reason. Elaine couldn't cook a meal without having to sit down and catch her breath. Richard would start screaming because he couldn't breathe; his throat would swell shut.

"I did everything I could do to keep from crying," Elaine said, "watching our son in such pain, gasping for air."

The Kubicas set out to discover what was making them sick. First, they thought it was something in their new chairs that was giving off some toxic

fumes so they threw away the chairs. When that didn't work, they thought it might be their drapes so they destroyed those, too. Still, the symptoms continued. They had read about how sometimes carpets were responsible for emitting particles from their fibers so they steam-cleaned the entire house.

After that, say the Kubicas, things got worse. Becky was taken to the hospital where doctors discovered a hole in her esophagus. They couldn't determine how the hole got there. Richard became so violently ill that he went into shock and was also rushed to the hospital.

Then a neighbor's dog took a nap in their garage on a piece of carpet that was covering a discarded section of insulation. The dog never woke up.

The Kubicas had thought about the insulation before. Jerry remembered how he and his friend became sick when installing it. But this was not the kind of insulation that was being banned by the government. It was the standard type found in most people's homes—Owens

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